

Priest Laicizations Decline Sharply Under John Paul II

By Father Kenneth Doyle

Vatican City (NC) -- The number of priests dispensed from their vows has dropped dramatically under Pope John Paul II, reflecting tighter norms and fewer priests wanting to leave the active ministry, according to a Vatican official involved in the dispensation process.

The official, Father Thomas Herron, said the number for 1983 was significantly lower than during the mid-1970s under Pope Paul VI when several hundred men were dispensed each year. The Vatican does not release figures for dispensations granted.

Father Herron is a 37-year-old diocesan priest from Philadelphia who staffs the American desk in the doctrinal section at the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the department which handles dispensation requests.

Father Herron said the drop in dispensations, also called laicizations, is partly due to fewer men leaving the priesthood, whether they seek permission or not.

Although the Vatican does not release laicization figures, it does issue the total number of priests who left the active ministry.

In 1977, the last full year of Pope Paul's pontificate, 2,506 men left the priesthood with or without being laicized. Of these, 293 were U.S. diocesan priests. In 1981, the last year for which Vatican statistics are available, the corresponding figures were 1,260 and 172.

The other key element in the drop, said Father Herron, is the new norms under Pope John Paul by which the congregation currently judges applications.

Under Pope Paul VI, no document specified the criteria, but in practice the Vatican standard was whether at the present moment it seemed best that the priest be dispensed. Father Herron said this meant that a dispensation was granted if the applicant was unable or unwilling, at the time of the application, to live up to the obligations pledged at ordination and there seemed to be little hope that the petitioner would change his mind.

There were many applications during the 1970s, and most of them were granted, said Father Herron. The typical case involved a man ordained during or just after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) whose expectations of happiness in the priesthood were not met, perhaps because of rapidly-shifting views as to the role and demeanor of a priest.

When Pope John Paul II was elected to the papacy in October 1978, one of his first acts was to put a hold on laicizations. For more than a year, no dispensations were granted while the pope began a study of the

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standards by which they had formerly been judged.

The new pope felt that if a man had pledged himself to a life in the priesthood, the good of the church demanded that the pledge be kept, said Father Herron in an interview with NC News Service.

Also, the practice of readily granting dispensations was creating problems in seminary formation, he added, as young men preparing themselves for a lifetime in the celibate priesthood were seeing many priests laicized, creating confusion as to what the commitment to priesthood actually entailed.

In October 1980 with Pope John Paul's approval, the doctrinal congregation issued new norms.

According to these norms, laicization is "not to be considered as a right which the church must recognize indiscriminately as belonging to all its priests," and the Vatican will accept for consideration only the cases of those "who should not have received priestly ordination because the necessary aspect of freedom of responsibility was lacking or because the competent superiors were not able within an appropriate time to judge in a prudent and sufficiently fitting way whether the candidate really was suited for continuously leading a life of celibacy dedicated to God."

The critical time at issue, under the new norms, is not the present moment but the time prior to ordination.

According to Father Herron, it must now be shown "with moral certitude, that the man should not have been ordained in the first place" for the dispensation to be granted.

Witnesses must give evidence to support the position that factors were present prior to ordination which would show that the petitioner's ordination should not have occurred. Only the petitioner's suitability for ordination is being questioned under these norms, not the validity of the ordination.

It is a trying process for the petitioner, Father Herron admitted, since it demands that a man "argue against himself."

The Vocations Question

A dispensation might be granted if witnesses testify that a man's integrity had always been in doubt, that he could not be believed or that he would consistently say one thing but do another, said Father Herron.

Other cases might involve a petitioner who had chronic sexual or drinking problems or someone for whom celibacy had always presented particular and major difficulties.

Often seminary officials are sought as witnesses. A rector or faculty member might testify that, since there was no peer evaluation of a candidate by his fellow classmates, a particular man might have slipped through the faculty evaluative process. In such cases, when a problem arises in later years, classmates may be found to testify that the petitioner already had the problem in the seminary.

The new norms, Father Herron said, have improved seminary evaluative processes, making faculties more attentive to their responsibilities so that they not be called to task later.

But laicizations have not ground to a halt under the present pope, Father Herron said, and a fair number are still being granted.

"If the case is well-prepared, the petition has a better than 50-50 chance of being granted," he said.

Father Herron said an example of a well-prepared case is when a bishop or religious superior has submitted it in accordance with the new norms and with adequate testimony, and if the bishop or superior gives the case his own recommendation.

When a case arrives at the Vatican, it is given by the congregation to one of several priest-consultors for their consideration. If that examiner judges favorably, then the congregation itself, a body of 15 cardinals

and archbishops, makes its judgment. Finally, the petitions recommended for a dispensation are brought to the pope by the congregation's prefect, German Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. The pope, said Father Herron, generally agrees with the recommendations of the congregation, but he discusses each case individually before granting laicization.

Normally the entire process, once the case has been submitted to the Vatican, takes about two years.

The only petitions exempted from the new norms, according to the congregation's 1980 document, are those dealing with priests who left the priestly life a long time ago without receiving a dispensation and who want to remedy their situation with the church.

This exemption is normally applied to priests who are elderly, said Father Herron. It was inserted by the pope because of the unlikelihood of a decision by such an individual to return to the ministry and to allow the aging priest to return to the sacraments.

When a dispensation is granted, it is from all priestly obligations, including celibacy and "the commitment to serve people in the priestly ministry," said Father Herron.

When a priest is laicized, certain restrictions are placed on his activity. Under the dispensation's general rule that "the danger of scandal must be remote" come specified prohibitions. These include not teaching or administering at a Catholic college, university or seminary, and not being an extraordinary minister of the Eucharist.

The dispensation does not prohibit teaching in a Catholic elementary or secondary school or in Confraternity of Christian Doctrine programs, if the local bishop gives his permission.

Tax Credits Still Seen Possible

Washington (NC) -- New tuition tax credit action is possible this spring, according to Father Thomas G. Gallagher, USCC secretary for education. He said the campaign to enact legislation will continue because of a well-developed network of tax credit supporters.

In a Jan. 19 letter to Catholic administrators, Father Gallagher said that although the Senate's 59-38 vote in November to table tax credits was disheartening, President Reagan, in a meet-

ing with tax credit supporters in December, indicated the possibility of action in the spring.

"It was his suggestion that we look to the possibility of changing some Senate votes and to priming the House," said Father Gallagher. "His staff is going to be assessing these matters."

The legislation would give tax credits to parents for part of the tuition they pay to send their children to non-public schools.

Father Gallagher said three

tuition tax credit advisory committees will be combined into one committee made up of parents, superintendents and state Catholic conference directors.

The Knights of Columbus funded the USCC Office for Educational Assistance for four years. Now funding remaining from that grant will be used to finance what Father Gallagher called a "a modified effort on behalf of current legislation and some efforts to reassess where our energies are to be placed in the future."

Will Lack of Priests, Religious Limit Church?

Washington (NC) -- With far fewer priests and Religious in the future, "can the church carry out its mandate to teach, sanctify and govern?" asked Father Eugene Hemrick, director of the U.S. Catholic Conference's Office of Research.

The answer is mixed, he told the National Task Force on Personnel at a meeting in Washington Jan. 16. He cited significant growth in the numbers of permanent deacons and lay workers in many areas of church ministry, but he also noted a number of problems or potential problems arising in those areas.

The national task force, a group sponsored by the national organizations of the country's Catholic bishops and superiors of men and women Religious, is seeking strategies to confront the church's personnel needs in the future.

Statistical projections released by Father Hemrick in December said that the number of active U.S. diocesan priests could drop as much as 50 percent by the year 2000. The number of active men and women Religious is also expected to decline significantly by the turn of the century.

Faced with this "dwindling number" of priests and Religious, traditionally the main source of church personnel, Father Hemrick told the task force members, there are a number of "optimistic signs" of increasing lay involvement in church work, but also some "qualifications must be made." Specific areas of growth he cited included:

- The addition of 6,000 permanent deacons in the U.S. church since the permanent ordained ministry was restored in the early 1970s;
- Some 700 professional religious education directors in the country, of whom more than 300 are lay persons working full time at that job;
- Increases in recent years in the number of lay volunteers, who usually devote one to three years to some form of

full-time lay missionary or service work.

- Significant lay involvement in campus ministry programs;

- The establish of diocesan planning offices in many dioceses to make better use of church personnel and help them become more effective;

- Extensive involvement of lay persons in new lay liturgical and service ministries and many other forms of parish or Catholic group activity.

On the other hand, Father Hemrick said, there are questions about such things as the adequacy of formation and supervision programs for permanent deacons, the adequacy of religious education programs which fail to reach more than two-fifths of the nation's Catholic children, and the changing nature of the church if parishes must be closed down or lay-administered because of a lack of priests.

He also raised questions about the adequacy of temporary or part-time personnel to fill vacuums left by the lack of full-time personnel. He noted, for example, that the average permanent deacon has a separate full-time job and works about 14 hours a week for the church, and the average lay missionary volunteer does not receive enough pay to make it a long-term career if he or she wishes to raise a family.

The average campus ministry salary is \$7,000 a year, he said, and in many places campus ministries are plagued with a host of problems, ranging from inadequate budgets to insufficient professional evaluation to tensions with unresponsive neighboring parishes.

Diocesan planning offices tend to lack needed personnel, job descriptions and planning and research skills, and their staffs receive low salaries, he said. Often their director is a priest who has other major duties as well.

In his report, Father Hemrick only summarized existing

research data on changes in church personnel and did not try to suggest what conclusions or directions that research might indicate.

He said the task force would try to deal with some of those questions at its next meeting, on March 6.

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